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ABSTRACT

While divorce for many women may be self-chosen, the consequent loss of income and downward mobility is often experienced as a disaster. After divorce, most women continue to be dependent for their survival either on their ex-husbands in the form of support payments, or on the state in the form of welfare. Neither of these options allows women to attain economic self-sufficiency following divorce and both continue a dynamic of dependency reminiscent of the marriage relationship for many. A study was conducted to examine changes in social identity following divorce. In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 women who were divorced for 1 to 6 years, had not remarried, and had at least one dependent child at home. All subjects had experienced a self-defined significant decrease in their standard of living following their divorce. Interview data revealed a pattern of social comparisons corresponding to different social situations and relative to former and new reference groups. These social comparisons were used to redefine the self within society. Patterns found included upward comparisons with members of former reference groups sharing a common background, such as ex-husbands and family members; lateral comparisons on the basis of new social roles, such as other divorced women or working mothers; and downward comparisons with members of new reference groups sharing an undesired common fate, such as other women on welfare. (NB)

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Divorce and Downward Mobility for Women: Gender and Social Comparison

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This presentation describes an interview study examining the changes in social identity of women after divorce and downward mobility. I will discuss the changes brought about by assuming the status of single parent and head of household and, in particular, the role that social comparison processes play in changes in conceptions of self.

The model used for analyzing women's responses to divorce and downward mobility is based on one used to study other experiences of trauma and victimization. A large literature examines how people respond to life-threatening illness (Silver & Wortman, 1980; Taylor, 1983) and traumatic events, such as rape (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979) in adaptive ways. This model uses social comparison processes, stemming from Festinger's (1954) original formulation, to understand how people situate themselves in relation to others socially, as well as use cognitive strategies of self-enchancement. Social comparison processes have also been used to explain the pervasive findings of sex differences in personal entitlement (Major, 1987).

Social comparison theories provide a structure for analyzing how women situate themselves relative to others, given the dramatic change in their social circumstances following divorce. While divorce for many women may be self-chosen, the consequent loss of income and downward mobility is often experienced as a disaster, where a woman's previous standard of living and social class status are called into question. Indeed, another large literature documents the economic consequences of divorce for

women, whereby the average woman suffers a 73% decrease in her standard of living one year after divorce, compared to a 42% increase in standard of living for a man (Weitzman, 1985). The twin changes in marital and economic status ensusing from divorce necessitate a realignment of one's status in relation to others, and social comparison concepts, such as reference group, provide anchors for examining these changes.

In order to examine these changes in social identity following divorce, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty women who were divorced from one to six years, unremarried, and with at least one dependent child at home. All had experienced a self-defined "significant decrease in standard of living" following divorce. Interviewees were found through community agencies, a newspaper article, and personal recommendations.

To give you a brief profile of the sample, the average woman interviewed was: 38 years old, white, married for 11 years, divorced for 3 years, and with an average of 2 dependent children. However if children over 18 were counted, then they averaged close to 3 children each.1 They were most likely to be either a high school or college graduate. Half were currently employed, all of whom worked at stereotypic women's jobs, such as secretary, waitress, child-care worker, teacher's aide. Half were receiving some form of public assistance at the time of the

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1. This last is an important issue as many of the women were angry taht child support only went up to age 18, when they felt they often continued after that time to absorb child-rearing expenses.

interview, such as AFDC, food stamps, child care or housing subsidy; another 20% had received public assistance at some time in the past. And 2/3 were not receiving or receiving sporadically their child support.

Overall the marriages were evenly divided into three types: Long-term marriages, averaged fifteen years, usually to professional men, and had the oldest children, such as adolescents. These women were the most likely to be awarded spousal support and often experienced the most dramatic drop in available income. Another third came from mid-length marriages, averaging twelve years. These women were often in the paid labor force while married, so the transition to working after divorce was not as abrupt; however they were often struggling to hold onto a house that was beyond their income. Women from young marriages came from the shortest marriages, averaging five years, and had the youngest children. These women were most likely to be on welfare.

Within this marriage typology it becomes apparent that there is a functional equivalency between spousal support and AFDC, depending on the duration and class of the marriage. After divorce most women continue to be dependent for their survival either on their ex-husbands in the form of spousal and/or child support payments, or on the state in the form of welfare. Neither of these options enables women to attain economic self-sufficiency following divorce and both continue a dynamic of dependency reminiscent of the marriage relationship for many.

Findings

A qualitative data analysis was performed, using thematic categories derived from the interview data. The pattern of comparison statements was traced by following the trajectory of different social settings that women encounter in the process of divorce and downward mobility. The analysis focuses on social interactions which evoked these types of statements in different social settings, such as the court, welfare office, social life, family life and work. Social comparisons with others were used to delineate how women position themselves within society, with whom such women identify, and with what reference groups they do or do not affiliate.

The following is one line of analysis that emerged from the data. What became apparent early in the analysis and was quite noticeable during the interviews as well, was the frequency of comparisons with others. These comparisons serve as a way to locate oneself with respect to others and to define one's self and social status. For instance, one common form of social comparison was what I termed "lucky statments," where women alluded to their good fortune. These statements stood out as paradoxical -- one would think that such women would feel anything but lucky, having recently experienced a rapid and precipitous decline in their standard of living. Such comments signal the operation of cognitive processes which may serve a defensive, yet adaptive, function. People often asked me while conducting this research if the interviews weren't depressing,

and indeed at times they were. More noticeable, however, was the unexpected prevalence of statements of luck by these women.

I found a pattern of upward, lateral, and downward comparisons corresponding to different social situations and relative to former and new reference groups. These social comparisons serve to redefine the self within society. The specific focus of analysis is the role that gender plays in these social comparisons. These processes are summarized in Table 1. The following interview excerpts illustrate the different comparison processes summarized in the table.

Upward Comparisons

Upward comparisons frequenly occurred with respect to family members, such as siblings. This is a good example of something that might have seemed unimportant during the interview, but during the analysis emerged as an important way to redefine the self. Upward comparisons reflect the status incongruity divorced women experience between their former reference group identification and a new reference group. The outcome of comparing oneself with others who share a common background, from whom one has diverged, is a degraded sense of status. For instance, the following are two examples of upward comparisons with siblings:

> My sister is a clinical psychologist, and she's really screwed. She doesn't give a shit. She's married, she's done it all right, she has a daughter and a son

> and everything is wonderful. She doesn't understand why I just don't go out and get a job.
>
> My sister has two perfect children. And I mean that in a literal sense. Her kids are straight-A students, one of them skipped a year. They're all members of the local church. Her daughter is a soloist in the choir, my sister is in this and does that, everything's wonderful, my sister's perfect.

Women made similar upward comparisons with married friends and ex-husbands, which also resulted in assessments of their lowered social status.

Other examples of upward comparisons occurred in the court. Institutional settings that broke down the privitization of their lives and made public these changes in marital as well as economic status were powerful settings for social comparisons. They provide examples of external standards available to assess their status as well as the perceived fairness of their situation. The court experience is also an emotionally charged turning point for many women; it may be the first time they consciously experience discrimination. Further, the court experience may take the form of a "degradation ritural" (Garfinkel, 1959) where their former identity as wife is destroyed and their new identity as divorced woman in publically certified.

A forty-seven year old woman, formerly married for twenty-five years to a physician, described her experiences, moving from an upward comparison to a downward comparison:

> Q: What was the actual court experience like?
>
> A: That was very very disturbing for me. The first time we went to court it was for the settlement [conference] for the money. The lawyer and my husband went into the judge's quarters without me. I said, wait a minute. Come back here. How come I'm not going in there? And my lawyer said to me, he is acting as his own attorney, so he has the right to come in and you don't. And I said, no, I don't accept that. I want to go in there too. No, as your representative I'm going in. I was very angry and very upset. . . . I was so angry that I was in the hall crying, and very upset, and I felt so powerless, that my life is in the hands of this man that I'm trying to get rid of, and some other men who don't give a shit about me. As far as I'm concerned, I'm pacing the floor out here, and they're deciding what's going to happen with me, and I thought, I can understand why people would want to blow up these buildings. I felt like throwing a bomb in there. I was that angry. And then I thought, well it's not so bad for me, because I saw other women, in the domestic court, who couldn't speak English, with

> little babies running around, and I thought, they're probably <u>really</u> getting screwed. They're even worse off than I am. But it was very disturbing, and I didn't get over that feeling for a long time.

This quote illustrates two interesting processes. First, because of feeling excluded and powerless relative to her husband, she experiences tremendous anger. Her desire to destroy the system by "throwing a bomb" into the courtroom is a sharp departure from her previous moral ideas and her conception of herself. Second, in the context of the discrepancy between herself and her husband, she invokes gender and race in a downward comparison with other women, less advantaged than she, who are "really getting screwed." By engaging in a downward comparison, she repositions her situation relative to other women, which overshadows her feelings of anger. Crucially, she switchs from a between-gender comparison, which evokes her anger, to a within- gender comparison, where her anger is diminished by feeling elevated relative to other women. This type of comparison recurs in the different institutional settings throughout the interviews.

<u>Lateral Comparisons</u>

Within the family setting, women tend to engage in lateral comparisons where they transpose their social position as a head of household on the basis of social "roles." As heads of households these women view society from a different vantage

point than when wives. Their change in marital status provides them with access to the responsibilities usually associated with a male breadwinner. Because women within a breadwinner role are still a contradiction within the labor force, they invoke gendered comparisons in terms of roles to understand the demands placed on them as heads of households. Yet the language of roles is disembodied from the social structure, and these comparisons lose the perception of discrepancy and power differences underlying these roles (Thorne, 1980). The following are two examples of lateral comparisons, in which women compare themselves with men in the role of head of household. The first woman currently works in an electronics factory:

> I have learned so much, I can't believe it. For the first time in my life I totally understand the pressures a man goes through, the financial pressures, the emotional pressures of being the sole support of a family, of other people. When you've got children to think about, it can be real scary and the thing of coming home after a 10 1/2 hour day, 12 by the time you travel, and this is another angle from the man's point of view, and still having to cope with your family situation for several more hours. It's an exhausting, exhausting type of way to live.

The following quote is from a child care worker:

> And now that I'm a single head of household, it's stressful and it's hard work and I feel an awful lot like a man an awful lot of the time. And now I think it's ok for women to share a lot more of the responsibility of maintaining the household. I don't feel like women having to work is so unfair anymore. . . . I'm fascinated, though, with how much I feel like a male head of household and the kinds of struggles, the kinds of conflicting demands and pressures. I may or may not rely on drinking too much to relax. It's probably the only real unhealthy thing that I do to my body, but I'm probably like a man in a lot of ways in that every night after work I have several drinks. I guess I probably feel a lot like men do when they work too hard and don't have enough time off.

While their identification with the male role as head of household is accurate as far as the burdens of work, it is not in terms of the privileges it usually carries in earning a family wage or the problems of working single mothers in assuming full responsibility for child-rearing. Because of the structural asymmetry and power differences between women and men, the social "roles" of women and men are not simply interchangeable. Such lateral comparisons lack a focus on the discrepancy between ex-spouses or between men and women as groups.

Downward Comparisons

Women frequently made lucky statements in downward comparisons regarding their work situations. Since these women were all working in women's jobs, they were unlikely to work with men, except in authority relations, where the assumption of discrepancy is built in. Thus their evaluations of fairness were assessed relative to other women and not men. The women interviewed made no between-gender comparisons in work settings. This is consistent with Crosby's (1982) findings that working women tend to compare themselves with other women, rather than with men at work. Therefore, they do not feel personally discriminated against, even if they are experiencing a pay differential relative to men in the same jobs and are aware of sex discrimination in society at large.

Further, it is the between-gender comparisons that have the most probability of leading to social identification as part of a disadvantaged group of divorced women. Rather, their statements regarding work imply a comparison level with other women in their same situation, who are not as fortunate as they are. Such statements individualize their situation and minimize group identity, as was apparent in the courtroom setting. Two women, both working at full-time clerical jobs, offered statments of luckiness:

> The people at the Elks were very, very nice to me. When my little boy was sick, I was able to take off, do

> work at home, and they understood if I had to leave early because of the kids and stuff. And they were very, very nice to me. They would loan me money if I got broke before payday, so I was very fortunate. . . .The doctor I had is very patient, he doesn't mind if I only pay him a little bit each month. So I've been very fortunate that way.
>
> My work has given me time off so that I could be a homeroom mother when he was in elementary school, to do the parties. I've been really lucky that my supervisors have been understanding.

While such women may be lucky when compared individually with other divorced women, assessment of one's luck is only possible in a system that is inadequate. Feelings of luck imply a lack of control over one's circumstances and a lack of entitlement to having these needs met as a matter of course. This reliance on luck and lack of entitlement parallels lab studies finding that women pay themselves less for the same, or more, work performed than do men (Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984). They concluded that "people determine whether an outcome is fair primarily through comparison with the perceived outcome of 'generalized others', thought to be typical of some class of individuals similar to oneself" (p. 1411). In this case, women are using an implicit reference group of other women, who do not

share their good fortune in having understanding bosses or kind doctors, to assess their relative luck.

Welfare or public assistance offices were very fruitful places to look for downward comparisons. In these settings women are suddenly thrown into proximity with stigmatized others. They have to confront their change in economic status in a public setting, much as they had to confront their change in marital status within the court setting. The following are two examples of explicit downward comparisons with other women on public assistance which maximize their differences and minimize their commonality with stigmatized others:

> We've got women in here [low-income housing] that irk the daylights out of me. One of them has two kids in school until 2:30 in the afternoon, and she sits home and watches soap operas all day, and I feel like, well that's the kind of people that they should kick out and get her to go to work. Say "you've got one year to get yourself trained and in a job."

> But I found out that people don't look down on me as much as I thought they would, where most people seem to really admire me just for doing what I do. I just think it's real important for people to realize too, that not all welfare mothers are spending all day down at the bar. I mean there's a lot of that, and there's

a lot of kids running around with no shoes on, but I've done things like volunteer teach as an art studio teacher and I worked at the library as a volunteer.

These comparisons serve to minimize one's commonality with stigmatized others and help one to disassociate from a new, but undesirable, reference group. It also illustrtes how women have internalized the stereotype of the "bad welfare mother" against whom they differentiate themselves.

The situation that provokes an abundance of lucky statements is in regard to child support. Every woman interviewed who received some child support considered herself lucky, again implicitly comparing her situation with that of known and unknown women who constitute a new reference group for her. Common statements were of this sort:

Well, I guess I just accept that I'm not going to get it the first of the month. So if I get it by the 15th, I'm lucky.

Luckily my husband keeps sending money so that we can live. I'm able to buy my daughter some clothes and we always have food on the table.

Feeling a lack of control over their lives may underlie these lucky statements. At the same time, these statements may

act as a cognitive shield. Downward comparisons may protect them from assaults to their self-image by association with stigmatized others in public settings or identification with an undesirable reference group. Taylor (1983) has found similar downward comparisons with women who have had breast cancer. These statements are a form of cognitive adaptation to situations where one's identity and status are challenged, such as in court or the welfare office, and behavioral options are limited.

The flip side of feeling lucky is feeling angry, and women who did not receive their child support payments were quick to express their anger. This generalized to a perceived disparity in responsibility to child-rearing between ex-spouses, and more generally, between men and women as groups. The following are two examples of between-gender comparisons of inequality of responsibility to child-rearing:

> I am resentful that men are allowed tremendous leeway in society. Just start talking to any group of women that consider themselves to be fairly liberal, and they'll say, well a lot of men don't even pay spousal support or child support, and immediately they're putting him out there. Whereas with a woman it's like, you're the mother, you've got to do this. Not so with men, they get away with a whole lot. If a man does anything, he's wonderful. I just see them getting

pats, getting tolerances, socially they get all kinds of tolerances that women don't get.

So I kicked him out. Of course I thought I would get support, you know, they'll put him in jail if he doesn't pay the support, and I thought he would take that responsibility anyway. I mean, it's his kid. That's the thing that pisses me off so bad, is that women are constantly given the shaft, and why is it supposed to be their responsibility 100%, the child is half his? And yet they just let them get away with it.

The most common statement in regard to child support was "you can't get blood out of a turnip." Women who had sought assistance to no avail from the D.A.'s office for collection of unpaid child support have learned that their behavior rarely results in any positive outcomes. Instead, it may even result in punishment, through frustrating and time-consuming interactions. Further, since these institutions are stigmatized by association with other desperate and needy women, they represent an undesirable new reference group.

Consequently, the lack of correlation between their behavioral attempts and positive outcomes has resulted in learned helplessness for many women. Even if new behaviors were to effect positive results, with legislative changes for example, they remain untried and untested. They have lost the motivation

to respond and they accommodate to their situation, feeling lucky to get what they do. This strongly suggests the need for a system of automatic collection of child support, rather than the self-initiating system which is currently in place (except for welfare recipients). Further, the child support system should not be set within the context of the interpersonal relationship between ex-spouses, which brings the potential for punishment in the form of coercive threats from ex-husbands, which were very prevalent.

Conclusion

In summary, a pattern of social comparisons was found corresponding to different social situations and relative to former and new reference groups. These social comparisons serve to redefine the self within society. The following patterns was found: upward comparisons with members of former reference groups sharing a common background, such as ex-husbands or family members; lateral comparisons on the basis of new social roles, such as other divorced women or working mothers; and downward comparisons with members of new reference groups sharing an undesired common fate, such as other women on welfare.

The stigma associated with divorced womens' changed marital and economic status invites cognitive distancing from others in new but undesirable reference groups. This results in a tendency to maximize within-gender differences, particularly in stigmatized, institutional settings, where other women are salient as referents for comparison. Women who have experienced downward

mobility after divorce are most likely to engage in between-gender comparisons of discrepancy in the area of child rearing. This fosters a group identification on the basis of gender and/or maternal categories. According to relative deprivation theory, these comparisons hold the most probability for social behavior to better the situation of divorced and downwardly mobile women as a group.

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Christine Grella

Divorce and Downward Mobility for Women:

Gender and Social Comparison Processes

Comparison Direction	Target of Comparison	Situations Evoking Comparisons	Outcome of Comparisons
Upward	-individuals of former reference groups sharing a common background, e.g., siblings, married friends, ex-husband -men as a group based on gender or maternal/marital status -cultural stereotype of "mythical mother"	-perceptions of between-group disparity -situations of perceived disadvantage, e.g., court, work settings -perceived inequality of responsibility for child-rearing -public social encounters	-degraded self -feelings of grievance and anger -group identity based on gender or maternal/marital status -egoistic relative deprivation (with ex-husband) & fraternal (with group)
Lateral	-others in same social roles, e.g., "divorced woman," "working mother," "head of household" -others sharing a common fate -- either known or abstract unknown others	-social encounters with friends -support groups with "like others" -media depictions	-redefined self based on social role or location -lack of comparison of inequality based on power differences -group identity with known or unknown others
Downward	-individuals of new reference groups sharing an undesired common fate -cultural stereotype of "bad mother"	-perceptions of within-group differences -institutional settings which break down privitization -in response to members of undesirable new reference groups, e.g., welfare recipients	-enhanced self -feelings of luck -an individualizing of one's situation -disidentification with stigmatized reference group